

8.—An indigenous term for the Western Australian sandplain and its vegetation

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Abstract

Sclerophyll shrublands which characterise the vegetation of countries with a Mediterranean climate are variously termed maquis, macchia, chaparral and fynbos. Western Australia has not enjoyed a similar native term. It is shown that in the Aboriginal Nyungar language of the South-west there was a word Kwonkan (gwong-gan) variously spelt Guangan, Quangen, Gongan, Quoncken and Quonkan by authors, meaning sandy country with an open, scrubby vegetation. This "sandplain" vegetation is not a physiognomic or floristic unity but consists of at least two plant formations. None the less the formations are all sclerophyll shrubland and possess a unity in contrast to forest, woodland and steppe. The introduction into common usage of a term spelt kwongan is suggested.

Introduction

In those countries of the world which enjoy a typically Mediterranean climate—mesothermal, with winter rain and summer drought—much of the vegetation consists of sclerophyll shrublands which are to a large extent physiognomically similar. Local terms exist for this vegetation which have come to be widely known and have even passed into common usage. In the Mediterranean area itself such a term is maquis in its French and machia in its Italian form, both from a Corsican dialect word meaning "wild, bushy land" (American College Dictionary, Barnhart and Stein, 1961 ed.). In California the corresponding term is chaparral, an application of a Spanish term for a formation of evergreen oaks, from chaparro, an evergreen oak (same authority). South Africa uses fynbos, the Afrikaans name for certain species of *Leucadendron* and the vegetation in which they are dominant.

The Sandplains

Southwestern Australia is another Mediterranean region and analogous plant formations are widespread mainly on the so-called sandplains, but there is no corresponding indigenous nomenclature in common use. Diels (1906) originated the term Sand-Heide which was translated sand heath by Gardner (1942).

The Aboriginal name Wodjil (Main 1967) is not defined by that author but describes a thicket of shrub-sized Casuarinas which is one only of the formations of the sand plain, while Beard (1969) proposed the terms heath, scrub-heath and broombush thicket for various of these. None is universally applicable.

It now appears that an Aboriginal word can be found which will have general application.

In "The Drummonds of Hawthornden" (Erickson 1969, p. 37) where the author is describing

correspondence between the botanist Drummond and Sir William Jackson Hooker we find the following:

"In July he (Drummond) continued by describing the Avon valley and the Guangan. The latter was a sandplain that lay to the north and east of the Toodyay Valley. 'Guangan', he explained to Hooker, 'in the native language means sand, but I mean by it the open sandy desert which commences about 80 miles E.N.E. of Fremantle and is known to continue in the same direction for 200 miles.'"

This word appears in G. Fletcher Moore's "A descriptive vocabulary of the language in common use amongst the aborigines of Western Australia" (1842 and 1884, p. 29) as Gongan, said to mean "A sandy district. The easiest road, or usual path, or mountain pass to a place". The word thus appears to convey the sense of open country and an easy route to travel.

What is evidently the same word has been found in the annotation to a herbarium specimen referred to *Adenanthos terminalis* R.Br. collected by the botanist Preiss, cited by Lehmann (1844). This reads "In planitie arenosa Quangen, Victoria. Herb. Preiss No. 795." In this case Victoria means the Victoria Plains district of Western Australia, not the Colony (now State) of Victoria. Preiss 795 is actually *A. drummondii*, a Western Australian species (Nelson 1975). This was drawn to the writer's attention by Mr. C. Nelson who had come upon the reference in the course of monographing the genus *Adenanthos*.

The same word apparently also crops up in 1894 in a letter from J. P. Brooks, a settler near Israelite Bay, to the botanist F. von Mueller which was published by the latter in *Proc. Austral. Assoc. Adv. Sci.* 6: 561-9. The letter gives a vivid and detailed description of the Israelite Bay district and includes the information that

"The character of the country is locally termed 'Quowcken' or sandplain. The meaning attached to this word 'Quowcken' by the Aboriginal natives is simply an open plain without timber and would equally apply to clear, grassy plains; whereas a European only applies it to these extensive scrubby plains, thus giving it a special significance".

Nelson (1974) used the spelling Quonkan after discussion with Mrs. Crocker, an elderly resident at Balladonia Station who remembered J. P. Brooks and had a life-long connection with the

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district. Mrs. Crocker thought that quowcken was mis-spelt and should read quonken. It is suggested that as Brooks' letter was handwritten it may have been difficult to decipher, and indeed his name appears as Brooke in the published letter.

Modern authority in this matter may be found in "The Aboriginal Languages of the South-West of Australia" (Douglas 1968) where page 73 lists the word Kwonkan (gwong-gan) with the English equivalent "plains country". Kwonkan is a phonemic transcription while gwong-gan is an equivalent in a "modified alphabet" used by Douglas to enable non-linguist readers to read out items. As the Nyungar language spread across the South-west from Geraldton to Esperance and maybe even to Eucla it is likely that the word was widely known and that the variant spellings Guangan, Gonggan, Quangen, and Quowcken (or Quoncken) are all attempts to symbolise dialect variants of the same word (W. H. Douglas, pers. com.). As English spelling is not properly phonetic it is often difficult to decide how an author intended a transcribed word of this nature to be pronounced. It seems probable that Drummond intended Guangan to be pronounced Gwong-gan (cf. quantity, and the Western Australian quandong, common name for *Santalum acuminatum*), and that Freiss' Quangen should be expressed as Kwonggan. There is thus little real difference between the various renderings of the word.

If one were to attempt to standardise for common usage it would be necessary to adopt a form which could be readily comprehended and did not appear uncouth, and Kwongan is suggested. There is precedent for the Kw combination in a number of place names in the South-west, e.g. Kwolyin, Kweeda, Kwobrup.

The meaning of kwongan

We have thus a word, but what exactly does it mean? The various definitions make it clear that kwongan means a type of country, just as maquis does. "The character of the country is locally termed 'Kwowcken'" (Brooks). The various definitions all agree essentially on the meaning. The country is sandy (a sandy desert, a sandy district, a sandy plain) and is open without timber-sized trees but with a scrubby vegetation. It consists of plains in an Australian sense of open country rather than in a strict sense of flat country—though much of the open country is also flat.

Sandy "plains" of this nature are very common in South-western Australia where they most commonly appear as relics of a Tertiary land surface coated with laterite which may either be present at the surface or covered with varying depths of sand. According to the detailed accounts of the vegetation which have been published for the eastern half of the South-west, (Beard 1969, 1972 a-e, 1973 a-b) there are two principal plant formations in the kwongan, scrub heath and broombush thicket. These were defined (Beard 1969) as

Scrub heath: a mixed, stratified, partly open shrub assemblage with Proteaceae and Myrtaceae prominent, found on leached sands.

Broombush thicket: a less diverse single-layered very dense shrub assemblage consisting mainly of *Casuarina*, *Acacia* and *Melaleuca* species, found on shallow sandy soil underlain by lateritic iron-stone and gravel, or by unweathered granite.

The kwongan therefore does not contain or consist of one plant formation with which it may be equated. None the less both the sand heath and the broombush thicket are sclerophyll shrublands and possess a certain unity when contrasted with woodland and forest or steppe and succulent steppe communities. In this broader sense it is possible to speak of a kwongan vegetation in Western Australia.

Other names of botanical interest

The following Aboriginal names in the Nyungar language of botanical interest are listed by Douglas (1968).

- kwatinj (gwardin)—Figface, *Macarthuria australis*.
- manat (mangard)—Jam, *Acacia acuminata*.
- mut (murd)—a mallee tree, scrub country.
- palak (balag) or pol (borl)—Blackboy, *Xanthorrhoea*.
- tjarilmari (djaril'mari)—forest country.
- warilj (waril')—mallee tree.
- wont (wornd)—white gum tree.

In mut we can recognise Moort, the common name for *Eucalyptus platypus*, and in wont, Wandoo, the common white gum *Eucalyptus wandoo*. In tjarilmari we have perhaps the root of Jarrah (*E. marginata*). Warilj is perhaps related to Morrell (*E. longicornis*) or Yorrell (*E. gracilis*). Wodjil mentioned in this paper from Main 1967 is perhaps related to watjan, fire.

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